No. 12

Museum Notes

INFORMATION SHEETS
from the
NEWFOUNDLAND MUSEUM

Maritime Archaic Indians: First People of the Coast

PORT AU CHOIX, 4000 YEARS AGO

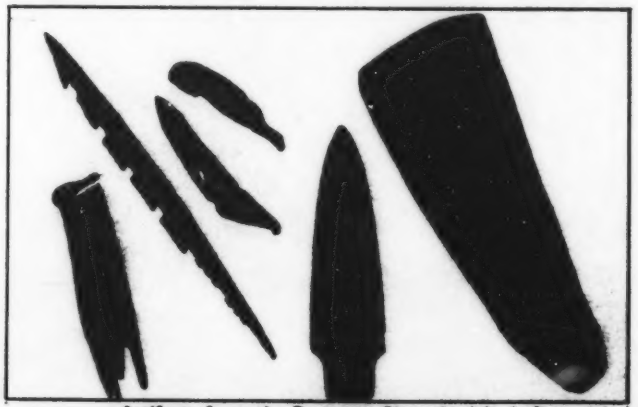
Today we arrived at the burying place, and tonight we will send my father and the baby on their journey to the Good Land. I have made them new moccasins, and for my baby I have the bill of the great bird to lift his soul to the next world. He was weak at birth and I knew he could not stay long with us, but how I miss his small noises and warm presence next to me!

It was a bad winter this year. Many people were hungry during the dark months. The pack ice remained far from shore, so that the seals who gave birth on the floes were difficult to reach. Several men were drowned when a boat trying to reach them overturned, my father among them. We took their bodies back from the sea spirits so that they could be buried here in this sacred place. From here their journey will be easy.

...The ceremonies are finished. Many fine gifts were given and the souls of our dead will be pleased. They placed my baby and my father together. I had wrapped the baby in soft new rabbit furs to keep him warm. I was sorry that I had no shell beads or copper pieces to decorate them. My father was dressed in his winter robe of caribou fur, leggings and waterproof moccasins. I gifted him with the new-made moccasins as spares and my husband gave him harpoons for hunting on his way to the new land. My son, his oldest grandson, gave him the skull from the fox that was his first kill. Many people gave bird parts, in honour of his helping spirit – the Great Auk – to aid his soul with swift flight. Others gave wooden bowls and cups and tools of stone, to make sure that he and the baby would have the things they will need in the afterlife.

Now that the ceremonies for the dead are finished for this year, our people will be moving to the river that flows into the big bay a day's journey to the south, to catch the salmon as they travel upstream. For a few months we will all be together, and have plenty of fresh fish, birds, eggs and berries to eat, before it is time to return to this country to begin hunting and planning our winter storage of dried caribou meat and fish. For a little while at least, our hearts will be light and our stomachs full, and we will forget the winter.

...It is mid-summer and we have been catching fish with our long spears for several weeks now at the pool under the waterfall where the fish gather. It is an activity that all can share, although the children spend most of their time chasing each other up and down the banks of the river. We all wade right in to spear the fish. Sometimes we play a game to see who can catch one with bare hands. Yesterday as I was doing this I fell right into the river! Everyone laughed at me, but I didn't mind. It's good to hear their laughter, especially that of the children. We have plenty of fish drying for the winter and even if the caribou should be scarce later on, there will be no hunger this year. So it is right that we should all



Artifacts from the Port aux Choix burials. Left to right: antler comb in the shape of a bird; bone harpoon; antler toggling harpoon head; human figure of antler; ground stone knife and axe.

laugh and enjoy the warm sun and this shining beach, and honour the spirits for bringing so many of us through the hard times.

(Fictional account by J. Sproull Thomson)

Some time before ten thousand years ago, groups of Palaeo-Indian hunters appeared in northeastern North America. Following mammoths, caribou, moose and other game along the southern edge of the great ice sheet, these Indians expanded their territory east until they reached the Maritime Provinces.

Their eastern movement brought the Palaeo-Indians into contact with the sea where they discovered a wealth of new food resources. Adapting their technology for hunting large animals to such game as seals and walrus, they soon became proficient at coastal life. The change in hunting technology can be detected in archaeological sites by the new forms of tools, the distinctive animal bones, and the locations of the sites themselves. Watercraft were developed as well as methods for capturing seabirds and fish.

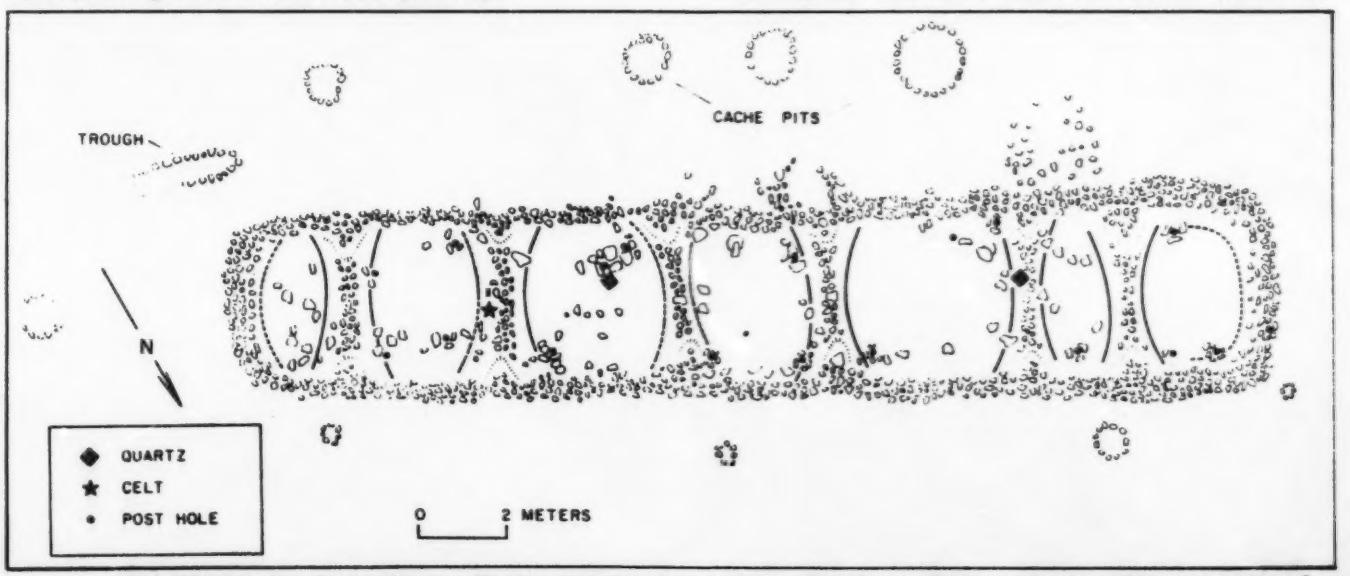
At the end of the Ice Age (8000-10 000 years ago), glaciers retreated to the north, eventually disappearing about 5000 years ago in the highlands of interior Labrador-Quebec. This was accompanied by the extinction of some of the large mammals, while others shifted to more northern regions. Taking advantage of new opportunities, Palaeo-Indians also moved north along the exposed coastal margins of Newfoundland, Labrador, and Quebec where living conditions remained much as they had been during earlier times farther south. Gradually, over hundreds of years, a new culture emerged as these people adapted to their new environment. Today we know these first settlers as Maritime Archaic Indians. They lived in Newfoundland and Labrador from about 8000 years ago until at least 3000 years ago.

Although the Maritime Archaic people lived here ten times as long as European settlers and their descendants now have, they made few changes upon the land. For most of the year, they hunted and lived in small groups, coming together in larger gatherings only briefly during the summer, perhaps for special ceremonies. They occupied all the island of Newfoundland except the Avalon Peninsula and most of Labrador north to the Torngat Mountains.

The Maritime Archaic Indians expanded into northern Labrador by about 4500 B.C., 2000 years before the appearance of the spruce forest. These earliest northern Maritime Archaic people would have seen only alder, birch, willow and a few other hardy arctic-tundra plants during that very early post-glacial period. They would have been aware of massive ice sheets whose margins were less than one hundred miles to the west. They discovered an excellent chert outcrop around Ramah Bay that allowed them to make thinner, finer weapons and tools. This stone became so valuable that it was traded as far south as the present-day New England states, and east as far as Ontario. In return, they received southern materials such as wood, birch bark, copper and beaver teeth for knife blades.

The way of life of these ancient Indians combined a dependence upon land animals and coastal resources. During the warmer months they lived along the coast and on offshore islands fishing; hunting caribou, seal, walrus, small whales and possibly polar bears; and gathering eggs and berries. When cold weather arrived, some packed up and went inland to intercept migrations of caribou and to hunt bears and the smaller animals of the forests, while others may have remained on the coast for the late fall and spring harp seal migrations. During the coldest and stormiest months, they would have depended upon stores of dried meat and fish, some limited hunting, and perhaps fishing through the ice.

During the very early Maritime Archaic period in



Archaeological map of a longhouse in Northern Labrador, showing stone walls and room dividers, cache pit outlines and locations of artifacts and features. (Courtesy: Smithsonian Institution).

Labrador, when the population was small and people probably travelled in family bands, they lived in small skin-covered pit-houses dug into boulder beaches. Later on, around 6000 years ago, they began to live in bigger groups and house construction changed. Two or three individual houses were joined together into longer rectangular structures containing separate "family" rooms, each room averaging about three metres square. The overall length varied depending upon the number of families in the group, but an average sized dwelling was about ten or fifteen metres, housing two or three families. These "longhouses" were constructed from a combination of stone and organic materials. Since wood and skin disappears in a short time, the only evidence remaining of these houses consists of rectangular outlines of piled stone on the surface of the soil. However, we can speculate on how the houses might have looked with low walls and room dividers of stone, and side and roof construction of poles and skins.

Each of the rooms in these dwellings probably housed a single family, had its own hearth and, outside but nearby, its own cache pit for storing food. The longhouse probably sheltered a group of related families, and through time more and more families were brought into these dwellings. By 2000 B.C. individual longhouses with 15-25 rooms and reaching 50-80 metres in length were used, perhaps occupied by 100 people.

Longhouse sites are located along the entire coast of Labrador, and usually there are a number of longhouses together. Probably as winter approached, these gatherings would disperse, and smaller groups would remain on the coast, with others making their way inland, and building smaller, sturdier winter houses much like the historically-known winter wigwams of the Micmac and Naskapi-Montagnais. Only a few Maritime Archaic inland sites are presently known. It appears that the Maritime Archaic people preferred coastal life, as their name implies, and their use of the interior was sparse and of short duration.

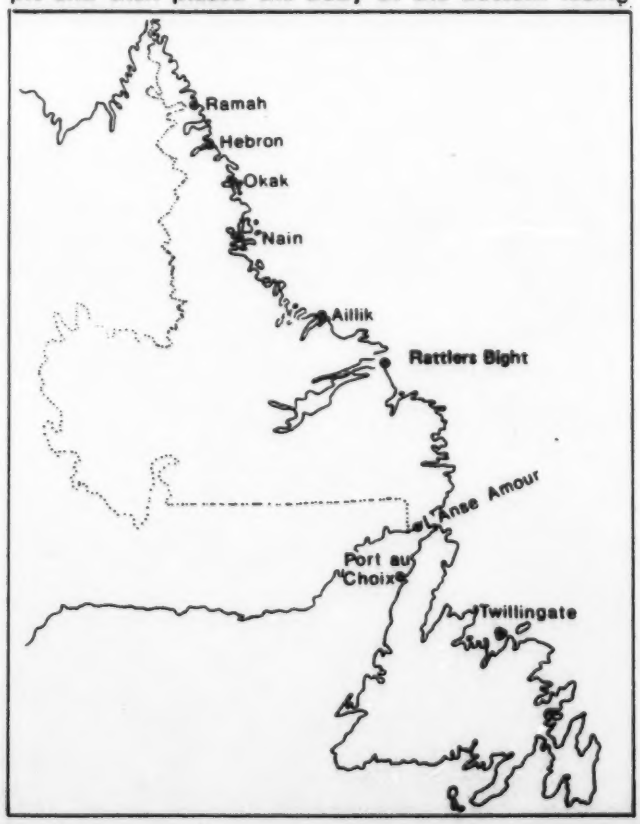
We know very little about the clothing or boats used by the Maritime Archaic people. Their cemetery at Port au Choix, Newfoundland, showed some evidence of hooded coats made from the skins of animals. Indirect evidence for skin working is found in the cutting and scraping tools and bone needles recovered from both burial and habitation sites. These people obviously had boats; they lived along the coast and on islands, and they hunted sea animals. But we do not know how big the boats were or whether they were made from birch-bark, like those of the historic Indians of the east, of hides like those of the Eskimo and Inuit, or of wood like those of the Northwest Coast Indians.

In 1968 a Maritime Archaic cemetery in Port au Choix was excavated by archaeologists. Almost a hundred people were buried here over the millennium from 2300-1300 B.C. A great deal was learned from this cemetery and another at Twillingate, Notre Dame Bay. By examining the skeletons, we discovered that these Indians were stocky and healthy, and had few cavities in their teeth. However, they suffered occasionally from arthritis, and the gritty food they ate (for example, clams and pit-roasted meats) tended to wear down the teeth and cause infections. Excavation of these burials also told some sad stories; many babies died in infancy, and one mother was buried with her infant in her arms.

It is certain that these people practised a religion with a belief in life after death because all of the graves at Port au Choix and elsewhere contain gifts of food, utensils and personal adornments to accompany beloved friends and relatives to the other world. People who were wealthy or considered important were buried with more or better-made items.

The cemeteries appear to have had some special significance; burial evidence suggests that the remains of people who died during the winter or in other places were not disposed of but were kept until they could be interred in the communal burial place.

In Labrador, the Rattlers Bight cemetery (2000 B.C.) is the largest yet known for this region and dates about the same time as the Port aux Choix and Twillingate ones. The earliest Maritime Archaic Indian burial known is at L'Anse Amour, Labrador, on the Strait of Belle Isle. Here a child about 12 years old was buried 7500 years ago. The people who made the grave must have considered the child to be important for some reason, for they dug a very deep, wide pit and then placed the body at the bottom facing



downwards, and lit ceremonial fires near its head and feet. The stretched-out, face-down position of the body, the size of the grave, and the ceremonial nature of the evidence makes the burial unique in the Maritime Archaic tradition. Grave gifts included a bone whistle, some stone tools, and the earliest toggling harpoon head yet found in North America; evidence that sea mammal hunting had already been practised long enough to develop a special technology for it.

During this early period, and until about 5000 years ago, the Maritime Archaic people seem to have buried their dead in single isolated mounds like that at L'Anse Amour. These graves consisted of a pit about a metre in diameter and two meters deep. The body was flexed, or curled up in the fetal position, perhaps for both religious and practical reasons (religious reasons might include the idea of "rebirth"; practical ones, the need to dig only a small grave). Red ochre was sprinkled on the grave and smeared over the body, which was enclosed in a birchbark shroud, and sometimes tools and sheets of mica were placed with the deceased. It is tempting to guess that the mica might have been a "mirror to the spirit world" and the red ochre a symbol of blood and thus life or rebirth. Although one can only speculate on these things, it appears that these early people had strong religious beliefs and feelings of love and concern for their family and friends.

About 4000 years ago changes occurred that ultimately forced the Maritime Archaic to retreat from some of their broad territory. In Northern Labrador, early Eskimo groups arriving from the north and west moved south into the Nain - Okak region, displacing Maritime Archaic groups that had resided there for thousands of years. Maritime Archaic people nevertheless remained in parts of northern Labrador in order to hunt and especially to obtain the valuable chert which was not available anywhere else. Located north of the new Eskimo lands, these Maritime Archaic people built large numbers of longhouses, and it is interesting to note that these houses, built 4000-3500 years ago, are the largest known, up to 100 metres in length. Perhaps the larger group size was a response to an increased need to defend themselves and their territory against Eskimo expansion in the region.

After 3500 years ago, however, these northern Maritime Archaic outposts were abandoned and northern Labrador was taken over completely by Pre-Dorset Eskimos. At the same time, Indians of the Saunders complex, a new culture with few ties to the preceeding Maritime Archaic culture, occupied southern and central Labrador, apparently displacing the Maritime Archaic in these regions. On the island of Newfoundland, Maritime Archaic traditions persisted for another 500 years, until about 3000 years ago, when the advancing Palaeo-Eskimos settled western Newfoundland and subsequently took control over the Island.

Archaeologists do not yet fully understand the causes of these changes. It seems likely that Maritime Archaic people in Labrador experienced hunting problems during the period after 3500 years ago when the climate grew slightly cooler, making support of settlements north of the treeline more difficult. However, this was also a time of change for Maritime Archaic cultures south of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, as the appearance of these cultures in southern and central Labrador coincided with pressure from Eskimos to the north. Together with climate changes, the arrival of these people seems to have signalled the end of the long period of cultural continuity which had begun more than 4000 years earlier with the northward movement of Palaeo-Indians into Newfoundland and Labrador.

For the next 3000 years both Newfoundland and Labrador saw the rise and fall of a number of different Indian and Eskimo cultures. At times, Eskimo groups expanded south and occupied Newfoundland; in others, Indians regained control of the Newfoundland and Labrador coast as far north as the tree limit near Hebron. Competition for coastal resources seems to have had the cause of these shifts, for it appears that Indian groups continued to live on the Labrador interior, and probably constantly challenged Eskimos for control of the coast. One example of this situation may be found in the predominantly interior adaptation of the Montagnais and Naskapi Indians in Labrador and Quebec at a time when Inuit moved into the wooded, central coast region of Labrador, and the southern coast was occupied by Europeans. European occupation of coastal Newfoundland caused a similar retreat of Beothuck people from the Newfoundland coast.

At present, archaeological research has not been able to trace the precise events concerning the fate of the people who lived in Labrador and Newfoundland during the Maritime Archaic period. Even though Maritime Archaic culture disappeared about 3000 years ago, this does not necessarily mean that the descendants of the Maritime Archaic people have disappeared from Newfoundland and Labrador. The key to their successful occupation here over thousands of years had been an ability to adapt to new situations until historic times, when they were recognized as the Beothuk, Naskapi and Montagnais Indians.

—Jane Sproull Thomson, 1984.

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